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MATTHEW ARNOLD AS POET: TRIED BY HIS "SOHRAB AND RUSTUM."

BY PROFESSOR W. O. WILKINSON.

MANY years ago, attracted by a laudatory review of Matthew Arnold's poems, I sought delight in reading them. I failed to find what I sought. I blindly blamed my own want of insight, and, for a long time after, abode in that uncomfortable state of mind as to Arnold's verse. A simple incident at length occurred that led to a change in this mental attitude. I heard a brilliant university teacher of elocution, a man of more than the ordinary degree of culture for one in the line of his profession, read to an appreciative audience Arnold's chief long poem, his "Sohrab and Rustum." The poem was well rendered, but I listened, as also the reader seemed to me to read, with difficulty and labor. I was at a loss to account for this experience, and I took resort to a private perusal of the poem in quest of the reason. I found the reason in the character of the work itself. "Sohrab and Rustum" is not, in any high sense, a true poem. It lacks "inevitableness." It is a great effort and not a great poem. Arnold manifestly labored at it with conscientious exertion of his best powers, but he did not succeed in producing what he wished to produce—which I have understood to be a simple "objective" poem as free, as Homer's poetry is free, from the modern vice of self-consciousness and introspection. I shall not, however, criticise the work from the point of view of its failure to be Homeric, but from the point of view of its failure to be a well-conceived, well-executed treatment of a well-chosen theme for a narrative poem.

Perhaps it may be well enough to begin with the matter of Arnold's choice of theme. It is to be accounted great good fortune for a poet when he lights upon a happy theme for the employment of his powers. This good fortune did not befall

Arnold when he decided on writing his "Sohrab and Rustum." The "fable" of the poem is supplied in a doubtful story belonging to the annals of Persia. Sohrab is the illegitimate son of Rustum, who abandoned the mother before her child was born. She found means afterwards to convey to the faithless father the false information that his offspring by her was a daughter instead of a son. Grown to man's estate, the youth wins fame as a warrior, but, in a spirit of filial affection and loyalty not accounted for, he restlessly seeks Rustum, whom he knows to be his father. The two finally meet in mortal combat, neither combatant aware that it is a duel between father and son. The son falls by the hand of his father. That, in short, is the story of "Sohrab and Rustum."

Not a very promising theme for a narrative in verse. Yet conditions might have existed which would have made it not wholly ineligible. If the two warriors had been noble men, enlisted generously on opposite sides in a noble cause, there would have been in the story the elements of possible pathos and power, mounting even to the height of overcoming tragedy—tragedy made tender and beautiful by the presence in it of heroism, of magnanimity, of self-sacrifice, of filial devotion, of paternal affection. But neither combatant seems to have been a soldier for a noble cause; they were both of them apparently mere soldiers of fortune, fighting for nothing better than fame. Rustum at least was an impure man, faithless alike to his wife, if he had one, and to the unwedded mother of his son. If he had traits of virtue, besides courage, to redeem his character to gentle judgment, not to say to admiration, these do not appear, either in the legend about him, which Arnold gives in quoted words as note to his poem, or in the poet's treatment of his subject. There is nothing whatever in Rustum's words or in his deeds, as shown in the poem, to excite the reader's admiration or sympathy for him. He appears unrelievedly brutal throughout. His selfish sorrow at the end is hardly an exception, and the same may be said of the passing touch of pseudo-sympathetic, egoistic sentiment for Sohrab exhibited by him just before the beginning of the combat.

Sohrab, if not a very attractive character, is at least not repulsive like his father. That he should cherish such a filial feeling as he does for a father never personally known by him, but known by him to be so unworthy, is a trait which, besides

being extremely improbable, psychologically almost impossible indeed, denotes a sentimental weakness in him of no very high moral tone. He ought to have sought his father, if at all, in order to upbraid him for his unfaithfulness both to his mother and to himself, this far rather than in order to fling his heart down in fondling affection at his father's feet.

The conditions, then, that might have made the "fable" of "Sohrab and Rustum" suitable for a fine poem did not exist, and Arnold must be pronounced unfortunate in his choice of theme. "Unfortunate," I say, but in critical strictness I ought to say, unwise, ill-judging; wrong choice of subject is part of the demerit of a poet considered as artist.

But now let us suppose that the Amphictyonic Council required Arnold to write a poem on this ineligible subject, and let us proceed to consider how he performed his compulsory task. Did he manage his subject well or ill? I am compelled to say that, in my opinion, he managed it ill—in some important respects surprisingly ill.

The chief demerit of "Sohrab and Rustum" lies in its lack of that which would necessarily have been its chief merit had it been present, namely, true imaginative quality. This lack is shown in so many ways that it may justly be said to be pervasive. It appears in the descriptions, in the similes, in the conduct of the narrative, especially the narrative of the combat, and even in the providing of accoutrement for the combatants. Rustum, for instance, is furnished by Arnold with a shield, which, of course, must be carried in such a manner as to make one of his two arms unavailable for any other purpose, except that possibly the hand on that side of the body might grasp the spear, which also is supplied to the warrior; a sword is not omitted from the equipment; but, most noteworthy perhaps of all, Rustum is armed with an enormous club, such in size and weight that no one but Rustum could wield it. Not even Rustum himself, it would seem, could wield it properly; for, at his first and only attempt with it, it plays him false, flies out of his hand, and actually brings its wielder down on all-fours into the sand. If, in addition to mail covering his whole body, even to his hands, Rustum must needs have with him such an amount of encumbering weaponry (together with helmet and shield), Arnold might at least have provided him with an armor-bearer. Instead of this, a horse, a

very remarkable horse, accompanies him to the battle, much after the manner of a dog, taking no part whatever in the action, but only, at a certain crisis of it, uttering a most lamentable boding cry, which had the singular effect of making the two watching hostile armies "quake for fear," while, far stranger, the River "*Oxus curdled* as it crossed his stream."

It deserves to be noted that, whereas Arnold gives Rustum a mighty Homeric breakfast the morning of the struggle, he sends Sohrab to his fate breakfastless, and weakened by a night of restless tossing without sleep. This unfairness on the poet's part seems to have been a pure inadvertence, for he makes nothing of the inequality under which the two combatants thus engage; but it is a curious inadvertence, and it has a certain tell-tale bearing. It incidentally shows with how little true imaginative sympathy Arnold, brooding on his theme, entered into the necessary concomitant conditions of the case.

Now as to the incidents of the fight. The two combatants begin by having a parley. Rustum was then first to act. He "hurled his spear"—presumably at Sohrab, though this is not stated; for all that appears at this point in the narrative, it may have been flung wild as a preliminary flourish of demonstration. But its course was peculiar. It was more like that of a battle-axe swung than that of a spear hurled. The language used describes a blow, rather than the flight of a spear. "Down from the shoulder, down it came," the poet says. The downward direction is thus given so emphatically that one is at once prompted to think of the action as taking place at close quarters, and not at such a distance as, on the contrary, *hurling* implies. But the downward direction is further insisted upon, and now with a simile, a singular simile:

"As on some partridge in the corn, a hawk,
That long has towered in the airy clouds,
Drops like a plummet."

The simile, it will be observed, is itself affected with a simile. "Like a plummet," Arnold says. This, considered simply as descriptive of the hawk's descent, is striking, strikingly good. The line, "That long has towered in the airy clouds," introduces a circumstance which seems apt enough as long as one thinks only of the hawk and of the hawk's descent; but the moment one

comes to consider the relation of it to the proper object of the poet in his narrative, it is as unapt as it well could be. The flying spear could not have hovered "long" in the air before it "dropped like a plummet." In fact, it is impossible to conceive of a hurled spear's behaving as Rustum's spear did. "Sohrab saw it come and sprang aside quick as a flash." It came "down," the poet says. Did Sohrab see it coming down? Then the descent must have occupied an appreciable portion of time. But, since the coming down was only "from the shoulder," how could this be? After Sohrab's agile avoidance of the spear, it is noted by the poet that the spear "hissed." Read a little attentively, and it will almost look to you as if the spear did not "hiss" until it saw that it was going to miss its mark! Whether, indeed, a spear, coming down from the shoulder, could *hiss* on its way, simply as the effect of friction with the air, my own experience with spears, or knowledge of them gained through reading, does not enable me to say; but, as a matter of mere speculation, it seems to me extremely improbable. I prefer to suppose that the spear in the case was conceived by the poet as hissing from vexation at missing its aim.

"Then Sohrab threw, in turn," the poet proceeds to say. *What* Sohrab threw, as well as *at what*, it is left to the reader's mental activity and judgment to decide—until, later, he learns that Sohrab "full struck Rustum's shield," when the second of the two doubts, at what, is resolved. Again the effect produced is described with the emphasis of repetition—"Sharp rang, the iron plates rang sharp," it is said, with "forcible feeble" effort of expression; "but turned the spear" is added, and now we know that it was his spear that Sohrab "threw." As Rustum's shield was "full struck," the statement that the spear was turned cannot mean that the spear was simply deflected and caused to glance aside; the meaning must be that the spear-*point*, and not the spear, was "turned."

Now follows a pass from Rustum very carefully described by Arnold, and well worthy of careful attention from the reader. "And Rustum seized his club," it is said. Where was his club? How had Rustum carried it? What did he do with it when he hurled his spear? We are left to conjecture. Let us suppose that he simply laid it on the ground beside him. Now, at any rate, he "seized" it. It was a portentous club. Arnold describes it

elaborately. As has already been said, nobody could wield it but Rustum. It was "an unlopped trunk." Just what an "unlopped trunk" could be it is not easy to imagine. No tree is spoken of, but trunk, used absolutely here, must mean trunk of a tree. Since the object in question was a club, it was not, of course, the trunk of a standing tree. But "lop" means "cut off." "Unlopped" should therefore mean "not cut off." How could a tree-trunk not cut off constitute a club? But perhaps the sense is that the tree-trunk was "unlopped" (not cut off) as to its branches. The branches, then, were still on the trunk. What sort of club would a tree-trunk with branches make? "An unlopped trunk it was, and huge, still rough," the poet says. The adverb, "still," suggests that the roughness was in process of being worn away, but that the wearing-away process was not yet finished. "Rough" may throw a light backward on "unlopped." Does the poet mean that the "trunk," though said to be "unlopped," was indeed lopped, but not closely, that spurs or stubs of the cut-off branches remained on it? Then "unlopped" must be pronounced not a well-chosen adjective.

The poet adds a comparison to assist the reader in appreciating the character of this club. He says the "trunk was

like those which men in treeless plains
To build them boats fish from the flooded rivers,
Hyphasis or Hydaspes, when, high up
By their dark springs, the wind in winter-time
Hath made in Himalayan forests wrack,
And strewn the channels with torn boughs."

("Hyphasis or Hydaspes" savors of Milton.) The comparison is really little help to the reader. It simply says, at some length, that this trunk was "like" any trunk. Curiously enough, however, it hardly succeeds in saying even that; for we have only "boughs," "torn boughs," to furnish the required term of comparison, no "trunks" at all. How large the "torn boughs" supposed may be we are not told. They may be of any size whatever. But the poet, as if now the reader should have no trouble in getting the right conception of the magnitude of that club, says, with evident sense of satisfaction over something difficult happily achieved, "So huge the club which Rustum lifted now."

"And struck one stroke," the poet next says. This seems to

be said very pregnantly, somewhat after the manner of Milton's, "No second stroke intend," or of Tennyson's, "Would strike, and firmly, and one stroke"; but the result is so null, so ridiculous, that the phrase itself becomes the reverse of impressive. Good reason, as the sequel shows, why the stroke should be "one" and no more. For Sohrab, as Rustum might have anticipated, especially after the experience immediately preceding, "sprang aside" again; and then happened—several things very surprising. That redoubtable club came "thundering to earth." This is surprising, since the "earth" that it came to was "sand"—as such constantly described by the poet—and how should the club have "thundered" falling into the sand? Next, the club "leaped from Rustum's hand." This, too, is surprising, since Rustum was a warrior of such doughty character, such mighty strength, and withal of such long seasoning experience, that he ought to have been prepared to hold his club, though his club should miss its aim. One might, indeed, suppose that, with presence of mind, Rustum let go his club (for this time proved useless) on purpose, as his best way of ridding himself of it. But no; it was an accident that the club left his hand; and no wonder that it did, since his hand was mailed, and it was only with one hand, of course the right hand, that he attempted to wield it. And now, stranger still than the strange things already mentioned, that experienced warrior lost his balance and came down on all-fours "following his own blow." "On all-fours," for he "fell to his knees," and, besides that, "with his fingers [his mailed fingers] clutched the sand." Rustum must have quite lost his head. Why should he "clutch the sand"? To spread out his hands palm downward would have saved him far better. A vulgar evil genius at my elbow suggests that Rustum felt his own personal "sand" failing him, and instinctively sought to replenish his supply. In vain I remonstrate, "Vex not thou the poet's mind with thy shallow wit, Vex not thou the poet's mind, For thou canst not fathom it." He presses his unworthy suggestion by pointing out that Rustum became "choked with sand." And true enough, it appears that, in Arnold's words, he "lay dizzy, and on his knees, and choked with sand." The whole passage reads:

"And now might Sohrab have unsheathed his sword
And pierced the mighty Rustum while he lay
Dizzy, and on his knees, and choked with sand."

(It is curious what pains Arnold takes to tell us that Rustum "*lay*," but did so "*on his knees*"!) That insufferable evil genius, impudently insisting on his point, says his theory is that Rustum, clutching the sand, with the purpose aforesaid, was confused through his dizziness, and so overcharged his mouth with it—whence the choking. But, of course, the true theory is that Rustum pitched forward with such momentum that his face ducked into the sand, and his mouth, unfortunately being open at the moment, filled itself involuntarily. Altogether, it was a complicated catastrophe, and, under all the conditions existing in the case, very surprising indeed.

Yes, as the poet says, Sohrab obviously could now have despatched his antagonist, or have made him accept life at his magnanimous enemy's hands;

"But he looked on and smiled, nor bared his sword,
But courteously drew back and spoke."

A Quixotic knight this young man was! He "*drew back*," and did so "*courteously*," and yet—he "*smiled*." Did he smile "*courteously*"? It would have been more courteous to refrain from smiling. Did Sohrab lose his gentlemanlike self-command, was he overcome with uncontrollable merriment, to see his friend the enemy's mishap? This unhappy lapse of his in high manners, he might have covered by advancing, instead of drawing back, advancing to the assistance of Rustum in regaining his feet! But perhaps it was a truer delicacy on his part to let Rustum show that he could get up without help!

By the way, this drawing back of Sohrab is the first change of position noted on the part of either combatant; or at least Rustum "*hurled his spear*," Sohrab "*threw*," Rustum "*seized his club*" and struck his "*one stroke*," all, so far as appears from the poem, without either one's moving either backward or forward, though Sohrab did twice spring "*aside*." Arnold's imagination was strangely unconcerned and inactive about all such details.

But Sohrab's smile was not a smile of amusement, as certainly it was not a smile of complaisance. It must have been a derisive smile. This is made clear by Sohrab's first words; they were taunting words, uttered when he "*spoke and said*":

"Thou strik'st too hard! That club of thine will float
Upon the summer floods and not my bones."

How derision, expressed whether in smile or in words, could be made to comport with courtesy, it would require Arnold himself to explain.

Enough now of this. "Too much, too much already, far too much," I hear some reader exclaim, who, admiring Arnold and perhaps loving him, has nevertheless, however impatiently, followed me thus far. "What good is to be looked for from such minute, microscopic, teasing, carping criticism? How much more satisfactory, how much more truly illuminating, would be a criticism that rises to a higher point of view, that takes a free, a large, a liberal range, interprets sympathetically, inspires to generous admiration! What poetry is there that could stand question on such a rack as that of this critic?" To which I reply: Any good poetry, any true poetry, could not only stand it, but come out proved all the better for the trial. Of course there is very little, if any, *perfect* poetry in the world, and, therefore, in the very best that we have some flaws could no doubt be found, should one search for them with adequately discerning eyes. But in all true poetry, the good would outweigh the bad, and, in the truest, the good would make the bad count for little, or even for almost nothing at all. No good poem could possibly yield to the most searching assay such a result as is left in our hands after a fair examination of "Sohrab and Rustum."

"But have you not picked out the most vulnerable part of the poem for the present examination?" My answer is, I do not think so; I certainly have not meant to; the whole poem is, I believe, fairly represented by the passage that we have examined. There is indeed one place of the narrative, and that the crisis of it, the hinge on which it turns, that is even more open to fair ridicule than is the place with which we have been engaged. If the levity, or, as Arnold would say in a case concerning himself, the "vivacity," to which I was overcomingly tempted in treating that place, exposes me to just rebuke, I may at least, in mitigation of blame, plead the example of Arnold himself dealing critically with authors whom he disapproved. A serious problem for the poet to solve in the execution of his task was how to bring about at length that mutual recognition between the two combatants which was necessary to the final tragic and pathetic effect aimed

at in the poem. It cannot be denied that this was a delicate and difficult thing to manage, but a more unhappy way of managing it than that hit upon by Arnold it would be hard to imagine. Rustum had made a great point of not being identified, or identifiable, as Rustum. He went to the combat with undistinguished armor, and he parried every attempt from Sohrab to make him acknowledge that he was indeed that redoubtable warrior. He would conquer by prowess and not by fame. But when Sohrab, after delivering two effective passes with his sword, at length stood suddenly helpless and weaponless, only the hilt of a blade that had been shattered with his last blow, remaining in his hand, then Rustum, with a fine chance offered him to be as magnanimous toward his antagonist as his antagonist had been toward him, so far from availing himself of that chance—well, what can it be supposed that Rustum would do? Let the poet tell:

“Then Rustum raised his head; his dreadful eyes
Glared, and he shook on high his menacing spear
And [can it be believed?] shouted, ‘Rustum!’”

Why he shouted “Rustum!” does not appear. It could hardly have been to reveal himself in his true identity, for to be unknown was a condition upon which he had insisted throughout—at least until now, and now there was less reason than before for making himself known; he had his antagonist helpless at his mercy. Was “Rustum!” his usual battle-cry? Then why had he not used it before, or, rather, since he had not used it before, why should he use it now? It seems idle to conjecture. It could not have been to strike terror to Sohrab’s heart, and so render him an easier prey to his spear. He was prey easy enough already. It seems like a pure freak of pure savagery—that shout, “Rustum!” To the wisely thoughtful reader it has the effect of bathos as absolute as possible. To Sohrab it had a very different effect. It unnerved him, not with panic fear; not with a sudden conviction of the shout’s meaning that this was Rustum, his father. No, for just after, with Rustum’s spear deep in his side, Sohrab exclaims, “Unknown thou art.” The young warrior was unnerved, he says, simply by the sound of the name, “Rustum,” issuing from his antagonist’s throat! This is the way in which he says it:

"Thou dost not slay me, proud and boastful man!
No, Rustum slays me and this filial heart."

Then the fatally wounded man becomes himself "boastful" and says:

"For, were I matched with ten such men as thee [thou]
And I were that which till to-day I was,
They should be lying here, I standing there,
But that beloved name unnerved my arm"—

The climax of Arnold's narrative is the climax of his mismanagement. But it is unnecessary to pursue farther the critical analysis of it.

It may be asked now: Granted that plot and narrative were out of Arnold's true line, yet is there not true poetry in the descriptions, and in the various similes interspersed through the text? A fair question; let us answer it fairly.

As an example of the similes that the poem contains, I quote:

"As when some hunter in the spring hath found
A breeding eagle sitting on her nest,
Upon the craggy isle of a hill-lake,
And pierced her with an arrow as she rose,
And followed her to find her where she fell
Far off; anon her mate comes winging back
From hunting, and a great way off describes
His huddling young left sole; at that, he checks
His pinion, and with short uneasy sweeps
Circles above his eyry, with loud screams
Chiding his mate back to her nest; but she
Lies dying, with the arrow in her side,
In some far stony gorge out of his ken,
A heap of fluttering feathers,—never more
Shall the lake glass her, flying over it;
Never the black and dripping precipices
Echo her stormy scream as she sails by,—
As that poor bird flies home, nor knows his loss,
So Rustum knew not his own loss, but stood
Over his dying son and knew him not."

"Is not that fine?" I am asked. There are fine things in it, I reply, but considered as a whole it is not fine; it is indeed far from fine; it is even sharply the very reverse of fine. "The black and dripping precipices," "her stormy scream," are fine descrip-

tive phrases; "a heap of fluttering feathers" is a phrase fine in a modified sense simply because it is effective. But now consider the passage as a whole. Its ostensible reason of existing in its place is to illustrate a situation in the narrative. Does it happily serve this illustrative purpose? Look attentively through the passage, and what points of resemblance do you discover between the circumstances of the one case and the circumstances of the other? Are there *any* points of resemblance, except that in each case there is a victim dying with a missile weapon infixed in the side? And yet this sole point of resemblance is neglected by the poet, when he comes to the turn of his simile, and the whole complex mechanism that he has constructed is employed to tell us that, as the male eagle does not know his mate is dying in a distant glen, so Rustum does not know that it is his son dying at his feet! Was there ever anything in poetry at once more ambitious and more nugatory?

I make no account of the broken syntax in this long sentence of Arnold's,—which those who will may regard as "noble negligence,"—but I feel that I must point out the extremely inartistic manner in which the poet contrives to divide and distract both the attention and the sympathy of the reader, and this, through the introduction of matters not at all pertinent to his own true purpose. First, there is a hunter introduced, who "hath found" a mother eagle "sitting on her nest" "and [hath] pierced her with an arrow as she rose [note the awkward sequence of the tense in "rose"] and [hath] followed her to find her where she fell far off"—which is the last of the "hunter." Next, the mother eagle's mate comes in for a share of the reader's attention. This mate "wings" back, and "a great way off" describes what again divides the reader's attention—namely, "his huddling young left sole." "His huddling young" seems to be a plural expression; could several eaglets huddling together be properly described as "sole"? But perhaps the poet's nice taste forbade him the alliteration of "left lone" or "left lorn." The male eagle is "a great way off" when he gets this view. What does he accordingly do? Why, "at that he checks his pinion"—was he flying with one pinion?—and by simply "*checking*" his pinion he, singularly enough, traverses the long intervening distance and arrives immediately at a point directly above the nest, and there "circles" about it, "with loud screams chiding his mate back to her nest"

—which is the last of him until, six lines later, he is for a moment returned to. Meantime, the reader is invited by the poet to consider the sad fate of the mother bird, pathetically presented through those six intervening lines. Finally, it comes out that, as the dying mother eagle's mate does not know that she is dying, so Rustum does not know who it is that is dying at his feet!

I have just now looked afresh through the poem, from beginning to end, with a view to considering carefully whether there were any good similes in it. I found a noticeably large number of similes, but among them all only one that strikes me as good, and that one is not, to my mind, more than passably good. Almost all of them are forced and unapt—some of them are remarkably so. Take this, for example; the poet is setting forth how glad the Persians were to see Rustum appear as their champion against Sohrab:

“ And dear as the wet diver to the eyes
Of his pale wife who waits and weeps on shore,
By sandy Bahrein, in the Persian Gulf,
Plunging all day in the blue waves, at night,
Having made up his tale of precious pearls,
Rejoins her in their hut upon the sands,—
So dear to the pale Persians Rustum came.”

It is really extraordinary to see Arnold go so far and fetch so little. Probably he was so well pleased at having hit upon something that would seem to fit as happily harmonious in point of local color, that he neglected to see how what he had hit upon **was** recommended by nothing else than simply that. The professional diver's wife would not stay “pale,” would not “wait and weep on shore,” *habitually*, as it is implied that she would, while her husband was plying his vocation, “plunging all day in the blue waves.” Curiously enough, according to the syntax of the passage, it is the “pale wife” that does the “plunging,” as it is also the “pale wife” that “rejoins her”—“rejoins” having no other grammatical subject than “who” preceding, and that “who” meaning the wife. But, of course, we know what the poet means, although at the same time we know he does not say what he means.

Now, no longer delayed by faults of form, let us consider the substance of the simile. What are the resemblances that make it fit and felicitous? The wife is “pale,” though we do not see

why she should be, and the Persians are "pale," though we do not see why they should be; indeed, the paleness of the Persians is even more an improbability than is the paleness of the woman. However, the two parties are somehow "pale," and that constitutes one resemblance; in the end, both parties are pleased, and that constitutes another resemblance. This latter resemblance is the only one made use of by the poet; the simile accordingly reduces itself to this: As one party is pleased, so is the other. The differences between the two, making the simile unfit, are very wide. In the first case, the party is one, and a woman; in the second case, the party is a numerous host, composed exclusively of men. In the first case, the relief experienced is relief from anxiety on behalf of another; in the second case, the relief experienced is relief from anxiety on the party's own behalf. In the first case, the element of personal affection plays an important part; in the second case, the element of personal affection cannot be supposed to enter at all.

Considering the other characters involved, we note that, in the first case, the party is a diver, who has been endangered, and who escapes "wet"; in the second case, the party is a warrior who has as yet certainly incurred no danger, and who comes forth supposably quite dry! It may, I think, justly be said that any example whatever of relief from anxiety, afforded by the opportune appearing of some one, would form as good a basis for a simile, appropriate to the occasion created here by the poem, as is the example invented by Arnold. In short, simile-making, the divining of similitudes, is decidedly not Arnold's strong point.

"At any rate," it may be said, "there is the famous concluding passage of the poem—you will concede that that is fine, will you not, more than fine, truly magnificent?" Alas, and alas, why should I, with question upon question such, be teased and tempted into exhibiting myself quite without critical mercy? Since challenged so, I must, I suppose, continue to be frank. Briefly and abruptly, then, to say the worst at once and have it over, I cannot admit this famous passage to be worthy of its fame. It has merit, but its merit is not that of high poetry, nor even of good literary art. What it essentially is must be set down as nothing better than a bit of fluvial geography couched in musical, and sometimes poetical, blank verse. I assume that the geography is accurate; I have not made an independent study of it, but ap-

parently the poet did this, and I shall not raise any question as to the trustworthiness of his result.

“ But the majestic river floated on,
Out of the mist and hum of that low land ”—

so Arnold starts his concluding strain, with evident purpose to have a pensively soothing contrast to the bloody scene that has just been enacted on the Oxus shore—by presenting to us the impassive river pursuing its course unmindful of the human tragedy it has witnessed. (I ought to explain that the “hum” in the case was “as of a great assembly loosed” [*sic*])—“for now both armies moved to camp and took their meal.” A casual and temporary “hum” therefore it was, though Arnold mentions it here as if it affected the landscape like the “mist” by the operation of natural causes.) Simply exclaiming, “mist and *hum!*”—the combination!—“hum!”—and then remarking, as I pass, that rivers in general do not “float,” and that doubtless the “majestic” Oxus was no exception to the rule, I point out that there were two different ways open to the choice of the poet in which to conceive and represent the flowing of the river in connection with his now concluded narrative. One way was, to conceive and represent it as it would appear observed by a person on the bank, say, a sympathetic bystander near the prostrate forms of the dead son and the mourning father. The other way was, to conceive and represent it as it would appear observed by a person floating down-stream on the bosom of the river to its mouth. The poet mistakenly chose the latter of these two ways. The effect is to detach the river at once from all relation to the narrative of the poem, and to engage the reader in a series of observations on the various fortunes that befall the stream on its way to the sea. In other words, that which alone could justify any such attention from the poet as he here bestows on the river—namely, its relation to his narrative, is quite forgotten by him, and the famous conclusion of “Sohrab and Rustum” becomes an unrelated mere geographical description, with no artistic right to its place where it stands—ostensibly *in* the poem, but really outside it, being not at all *of* it.

If, on the other hand, Arnold had chosen the way that he did not choose, of conceiving and representing the flowing of the river, one can easily imagine a perfectly legitimate, gently pathetic

effect produced by a meditative strain dwelling on the everlasting æonian lapse of the waters, forever and forever the same, unaffected by what might befall, whether of good or of ill, to mankind on the sandy shore which, with full current or slack, from season to season, they ceaselessly and impassively wash. But instead of being thus set to musing on eternity symbolized in the monotonous, unending, solemn flow of the great river and contrasted with the fragility and evanescence of human life and its subjection to all vicissitudes of chance and change, the reader is started off on a voyage down the length of the stream, with a personal conductor at his side poetically pointing out the features of the various channels into which the current divides itself and the aspects of the landscape through which it passes on its "foiled circuitous" wandering to the sea.

It is fair to note that in this passage, as it stands, there are fine touches, touches of a true poetic quality. "Under the solitary moon" is such a touch. So is "the hushed Chorasman waste." "Bright speed" would be, but that it is hindered by the inharmonious context, "the bright speed he had in his high mountain cradle." "Speed" in a "cradle" seems not happy. That the adjective "bright" should occur three times in the passage may be set down to the account of an Homeric carelessness about such repetitions; but the passage as a whole is very un-Homeric. Apropos of the adjective just named, I cannot refrain from admiring exceedingly a phrase that comes earlier in the poem, and has in it subtly something of both the brilliance attributed to the sea and the oscillating motion described;

"As the vast tide
Of the *bright rocking ocean* sets to shore
At the full moon."

If the present paper were a review of Arnold's poetry, the examination that has here been made of his "Sohrab and Rustum" would, though far from complete, be disproportionately long. But the present paper is not such a review. It is simply a series of assays of the "Sohrab and Rustum" undertaken with a view to determining, so far as that single work might enable us to determine, the true merit and value of Arnold's poetic production as a whole. The promise of the title has accordingly been fulfilled.

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